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AUTHOR Lockwood, Fred
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ABSTRACT

Open University course production involves a course team that is responsible for the initial planning, production, and presentation of the teaching material. Informal work sessions with other authors create an environment critical for authors' socialization into course production and the perpetuation of course team practice. This environment promotes consensus concerning the assumptions and expectations associated with the role of activities in distance teaching texts. These constitute the "espoused theories" held by authors. The difference between what authors say they do with regard to activities and what they actually do (as illustrated in their finished teaching material) resembles the distinction between "espoused theories" and "theories in use." Evidence from 23 interviews, 18 questionnaires, and 18 self-recorded tapes provided by students reveal a gross mismatch between author "espoused theories"/"theories in use" and students' perception and use of activities. Many students could identify potential benefits associated with activities--course focused, self-focused, and assignment focused. The effect of authors' "theories in use" is to create costs for many students. The most obvious is concern over available study time. In attempting to reduce this cost by adopting particular study strategies, students incur other costs. They ignore or skimp on activities, display undue deference to authors' comments, and acquire feelings of inadequacy and guilt. (YLB)

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Teaching and Consultancy Centre

Report No 40

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Activities in distance teaching texts; author's assumptions and expectations contrasted with students' perceptions and use

by Fred Lockwood

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Its aims are:

1. **To help improve student learning** in the University by advising and assisting Faculties, Schools, Continuing Education, University Committees and groups, as appropriate. A chief concern is the accessibility and teaching effectiveness of course materials, to which the Centre contributes through its work on course teams: through research; course planning, policy making and working methods; critical reading of draft materials, and the evaluation of courses.

2. **To maintain a knowledge base** for the above activities by helping to research problems in the OU learning system and by recording experience in course teams and on committees, and also to encourage innovatory solutions and practices.

3. **To provide consultancy and training,** inside the OU and on a contract basis with outside organisations, based on the staff's wide experience in distance education and open learning. On this same basis, to chair course teams and write course materials, and to 'transform' materials produced by external contributors into high quality distance teaching material.

Foreword

This paper draws on the author's work with Open University course teams over many years, on interviews with academic staff and students and on his reading of the research literature. A later version was published as 'A Course Developer in Action - A Reassessment of Activities in Texts' in Development, Design and Distance Education, M.S.Parer (ed.), Centre for Distance Learning, Gippsland Institute of Advanced Education, Victoria, Australia, 1989.

ACTIVITIES IN DISTANCE TEACHING TEXTS; AUTHOR'S ASSUMPTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS CONTRASTED WITH STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS AND USE

Introduction

Persuasive arguments, designed to encourage authors to integrate questions into distance learning materials have been repeatedly employed by educational technologists. Many of us have endorsed the idea of a 'Tutorial-in-Print' (Rowntree, 1973) and assembled notes to guide and inform our colleagues. The following extract, drawn from a memo to Open University authors is typical:

> *"You can simulate this tutorial process by thinking of the hours that students will spend working on your material as time spent in your company. What would you expect them to do during that time? It is unlikely that you would expect them simply to read your material from start to finish without reacting to it in some way or producing anything themselves. You may, for example, ask them to recall items of information, to define concepts, draw together arguments, justify particular statements, consult other sources, interpret data, compare different interpretations of the same data, work out examples, discuss things together and so on. In short, you would expect them to exercise certain study skills by which students construct their own picture of the subject and learn to integrate what you have just taught them with what they have learned before."*
>
> (Lockwood, 1978)

However, there is a distinct lack of evidence to confirm that authors' espoused theories match their 'theories in use' (see Argyris and Schön, 1974), that students' perception and use of activities in texts match the assumptions and expectations of authors and that the research evidence used to support current practice is valid. (It has been argued elsewhere [Gibbs, Lockwood, Morgan and Taylor, 1982] that much of the evidence which has been used to justify the use of activities in texts lacks relevance and validity in a distance teaching context.)

This area of concern is a legitimate one for any educational technologists and represents a cameo of my work within the Open University.

Socialisation into Course Team Practice

Open University course production involves a course team which is responsible for the initial planning, production and presentation of the teaching material. It is a collaborative effort extending over many months in which success is dependent upon establishing and maintaining a close working relationship. For some authors working within such a team and producing Open University teaching materials are new experiences. These contributors receive a briefing upon joining the Open University and are given various documents to explain and illustrate the course production process. However, the most powerful

influence on their attitudes and behaviours occurs informally in conversation with other authors whilst working within the course team and with colleagues within the university. That environment is critical for their socialisation into course production and the perpetuation of course team practice. It serves to promote consensus concerning the assumptions and expectations associated with the role of activities in distance teaching texts. These constitute the 'espoused theories' held by authors. During interviews with four authors, who had worked closely in the production of one part of an Open University course, the following were identified:

Activities in Distance Teaching Texts

Assumptions behind materials assembled and activities offered	Expectations regarding how material is studied and response to activities
• Activities an integral part of teaching, a realisation of objectives - rest of teaching material built around them	- students will recognise central place of activities in study and achieve objectives
• Author's excitement and enthusiasm for subject recreated in activities	- students share author excitement, added interest and motivation
• Range of formats and types of activity available. Aim for most effective and efficient. Aware that variety desirable	- students appreciate variety in activities in achieving course objectives. Different methods of presentation part of teaching
• Structure and order embodied in design of material will guide and control student learning	- students will follow the advice, instructions and sequence suggested
• Goal to foster learner independence	- students will think for themselves and have confidence in views, opinions and arguments they construct.

Author's pronouncements and actions - 'espoused theories' and 'theories in use'

The difference between what authors say they do with regard to activities, and which they communicate to others, and what they actually do, as illustrated in their finished teaching material, resembles the distinction between 'espoused theories' and 'theories in use' (Argryis and Schön, 1974).

The briefing documents provided to new Open University authors state the 'espoused theories'. Subsequent course team discussion at course planning stage and when commenting on draft materials reinforces it (Riley, 1983). However, whilst some strove to realise these 'espoused theories' in the form of a 'Tutorial-

in-Print', others adopted strategies that deviated from this concept and which constituted 'theories-in-use'.

Evidence from a series of interviews (N = 23), questionnaires (N = 18) and self recorded tapes (N = 18), provided by students who had studied the material written by authors, revealed a gross mismatch between authors' 'espoused theories'/'theories in use' and students' perception and use of activities.

Extremely few regarded activities as an integral part of the teaching material. None indicated the excitement and enthusiasm that authors had tried to communicate. Few could identify any types or categories of activity and those that did offered categories and types different from those of the author! The activities did not provide a structure and order for the study of the materials - summative assessment material fulfilled this role. For a substantial proportion the effect of being exposed to the activities, and subsequent follow up comments, was to inculcate a sense of deference to the teaching material rather than learner independence.

Perceived benefits from activities

Many students could identify potential benefits associated with activities; these were identified as Course Focused, Self Focused and Assignment Focused Benefits (see Mathias, 1980). Course focused benefits were those related to learning from the course - the concepts, ideas, arguments under discussion. Activities were regarded as

> *"...helpful in concentrating your thinking on the major points that have been covered...(they) give you greater insight into the concepts of the course...deepen your understanding of the units and course readers."*

Self focused benefits were those which contributed to the students' learning as a person - challenging preconceptions, introducing new perspectives, creating a questioning and enquiring attitude. The activities were

> *"...trying to make you take a wider stance and ...think more openly about it and to question your own thinking and to probe your own viewpoint...to make it clear. What assumptions you had or have."*

Assignment focused benefits were those directly linked to summative assessment - that contributed material to their assignment or their thinking about it.

> *"...if I think this is going to get me thinking more clearly about the issues at stake in the assignment then I might attempt it...it's got to be relevant to the (tutor marked assignment)."*

Costs incurred by students from activities

The effect of authors 'Theories in use' with regard to activities was to create costs that for many students outweighed the benefits they offered. The most obvious was concern over available study time; it pervaded all student comments and

represented a major cost associated with the completion of activities. The following remark is fairly typical.

> *"...I didn't do (the activity) really for lack of time rather than it not being a good activity."*

Furthermore, in attempting to reduce or limit this cost by adopting particular study strategies, many students incurred other costs. They degraded activities, displayed undue deference to the comments of authors and acquired feelings of inadequacy and guilt.

Degradation of Activities

One of the expectations of authors was that activities would encourage students to think about the course material by responding to the various intellectual demands embodied in the activities. A majority of students degraded the activities in two ways. In the first they reduced the intellectual demands of the activity to a level equivalent to or below their conception of learning (see Säljö, 1982). For example, one student was expecting (and appeared to prefer) those activities that were practical, discrete and which were compatible with his strategy of assembling a checklist or a series of key points to help him "learn" the material. He explained how

> *"I would like to be given something that I am going to actually have to work out or go and do ...activities that actually make you get a piece of paper and pencil...that is more relevant than just saying ...'What do you think about so and so?"*

In subsequent discussion the student indicated that his expectation was for fairly low level activities - exercises in which data was manipulated, key points identified, rather than those in which he considered a viewpoint or marshalled an argument. He appeared fixated at a practical, mechanical, concrete level and was either unprepared or unable to engage in more sophisticated intellectual tasks.

> *"I didn't expect to spend ten minutes considering or evaluating."*

In the second form of degradation, students collapsed the question(s) and associated follow up comments that constituted an activity, focusing on the product of the activity rather than the process. This action was in marked contrast to the assumptions and expectations held by authors.

The following comment typifies this form of degradation.

> *"I won't actually get down to doing it (answering the questions in the activity) because I have got a better comment underneath. We're mere mortals and undergraduates know that you blokes have got the best comment so we take yours. You might as well spend ten minutes learning that as sorting your own out."*

A similar comment was provided by a fellow student who maintained she just

> *"...read the comment...because you know it's one way again of cutting down the time and it's all written in the comment anyway so I can't really see the point of slogging through it."*

This form of degradation also had the effect of reducing or eliminating the excitement that authors were trying to achieve in their teaching. For example, a student remarked how

> *"I didn't ...give it a chance to surprise me, I just looked read through that (the question) and I read through that (follow up) straight away".*

Many students, whilst maybe not completing the activity along the lines suggested and in the time suggested by the author, did give some thought before proceeding to follow up comment. This ranged from those who said

> *"I vaguely know my own thoughts on things without putting them into words, without thinking too deeply."*

> *"I don't ...always put anything down on paper. I will often construct the idea in my mind and they help me to lay out what I think...so they are important."*

> *"...it depends entirely on the activity. Some of them I just look at and do in my head, sometimes I just get a piece of paper and scribble a few notes, other times I am more extensive - it depends what is asked for."*

The flexibility evident in the last comment was also noted in a majority of students interviewed; those who indicated that they didn't automatically degrade activities by one form or another.

Perhaps the most disquieting aspect of this degradation of activities is represented by those comments from students that indicate a reluctance to engage in those intellectual activities that authors are trying to stimulate via activities. During discussions with students about the role of the activities in texts the following comments were volunteered

> *"I don't know if they're helpful or not. Sometimes I feel they get in the way. They make me think. I don't want to think I just want to get on."*

> *"...some of them were very good, very searching...I think if it were too searching it might be the thing that went."*

This is not to say that students do not recognise some of the costs, as the following comment indicates.

> *"...you can't really afford (the time) to broaden your thinking."*

This student went even further and explained how responding to activities could represent a danger in that they could become time consuming.

> *"...if you get over involved."*

Deference towards authors' comments

A student's desire to comprehend the material maintained being presented, to understand the ideas or arguments offered by an author, is a fundamental part of study. A disquieting aspect is the deference paid to the comments, views or arguments offered by an author at the expense of his/her own.

The authors of the teaching material maintained they were trying to foster learner independence. The activities posed in the texts were designed to facilitate this; they offered an opportunity for students to check their understanding, clarify ideas, challenge their previous conceptions. Comments from students indicated that many activities were used in this way. Indeed, a majority of the students indicated a confidence in their own viewpoint and argument and were prepared to challenge those of the author. For example, one student described how she would not automatically discount her response to an activity in favour of that offered by an author.

> *"... I have got my own opinion about it - he has got his. Then I will probably think 'Well, why did he get his and I get mine the way it is?' and if I think that my comments are just as valuable as his then I will keep them...I don't just say. 'Oh, that's it, I have got it wrong'."*

Another, when asked whether he would be tempted to disregard his own analysis in favour of those offered by the author, replied forcibly.

> *"No, oh no, I won't, no way. I am afraid I have got my view - he's got his...if the person can't produce good reliable arguments I'm afraid I'm not prepared just to accept it. Anything can be argued for and against...there are pros and cons. What I tend to do is look at the material."*

However, a substanital minority of students, to varying degrees, displayed an undue deference to the arguments of the author - typically disregarding their own in favour of the author's. In this situation a student explained how she would, previously, have thought "Oh dear, I've done something wrong".

However, like several others, she now resolves this potential conflict by regarding such discrepancies as merely 'differences of opinion'. Some, whilst recognising differences of opinion, were more prepared to accept the author's comment rather than try to justify their own.

> *"If it was just that I disagreed, as sometimes one does in certain things, then that's fair enough. I mean that's his greater experience which I haven't got."*

Another student, describing her reaction when her response was different to that of the author explained

> *"I feel rather unnerved...I almost feel I must cheat - I must sort of put it down as thought. I have put it in my answer when in fact I haven't. It's a childish tendency to think "I have failed. Quick, I must put that down and pretend I had it". And I do that. I can see myself doing it. It is annoyance with myself really because I am prepared to accept that the person who is giving the comment is giving me some sort of 'right answer."*

Inadequacy and guilt

Many students, although not regarding the activities as a central and integral part of the unit, did perceive them as a valid part of the teaching material and believed authors had included them for legitimate reasons. The following comment is typical

> *"I'm not saying what's down in the activity is totally irrelevant, and obviously it isn't or they wouldn't have bothered putting it in anyway, but for me time is of the essence."*

Students' decisions to ignore activities, or to complete them less thoroughly than they believe authors intended, did not produce any positive feelings of being an efficient and skilful student but rather generated feelings of inadequacy and guilt at having to adopt this strategy. Students were aware of the potential role of activities in their study but remarked

> *"Oh, (the activity) aids your understanding, it certainly does and I'm a fool to myself for not doing it."*

> *"I thought they were all worthwhile, it's a great shame that I just haven't got the time to give to them."*

When students were asked what their reaction would be if activities were omitted from future teaching material, many said they would feel relieved, it would remove the feeling of guilt they experienced when skimming over or ignoring them. A substantial proportion of students were confidently identified as expressing feelings of guilt or inadequacy in connection with their failure to complete activities.

Concluding comments

There was no evidence from student comments, nor in any literature accompanying the course materials, that authors intended activities to be completed selectively, that time allocations may be underestimated nor that the course itself was likely to consume more than the study time appropriate. However, a senior author within the course team gave comments markedly different from the expectations of students. He assumed that not all activities, including those hidden in the text, would be completed by students

> *"I wouldn't expect them to do every bit of it to the same degree, it would take them weeks to do it."*

He explained how he assumed the activities would be used

> *"...The traditional role is to look at them, to read them and perhaps think about a part of it but then to be more interested in what you say about it than actually taking the required amount of time you've specified. I should imagine a handful of students might actually do that, but the majority of them not...I would hope that most students would get something out of them...a bit of an activity that got across the message, that actually did involve them."*

The author was both perceptive and pragmatic. He recognised the constraint of time within which students had to operate. He believed that students have

> *"...got to make short cuts (because the course) is a very heavy course, it makes heavy demands on them so they're going to look for ways in which they can cut within units and between units."*

If these sentiments are communicated to colleagues within the Faculty and within course teams they could influence the assumptions and expectations of other authors with regard to activities. This could lead to an increased mismatch with students' perception of activities - if not their use. The investigation is continuing.

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